Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness and the Rights of Minorities

A Thesis Summary

To

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By

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Gross National Happiness emerged as an alternative development approach to the neoliberal market economy system in 1972 when the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, declared, “Gross National Happiness is more important than gross domestic product.” Inspired by the Buddhist philosophy, GNH is a sharp rebuke of unsustainable consumption-driven Western society. Over the next three decades, this idea of GNH became a guiding principle of Bhutan’s governance. Bhutan created a GNH Index and a GNH screening tool (survey). In 2008, the Gross National Happiness Index was enshrined in the country’s constitution. The promotion of GNH as a holistic, people-oriented development paradigm was wholly supported by the United Nations, when in 2011 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution calling the pursuit of happiness ‘a fundamental goal’ and asking the United Nation member states to exercise initiatives which endow more importance to well-being in determining how to measure and achieve social and economic development. The move was endorsed by 68 countries then. In 2012, the United National Sustainable Development Solutions Network published a World Happiness Report which states that efforts should be made to achieve a new course “that ensures poor countries have the right to develop, and all countries have the right to happiness, while simultaneously curbing the human-induced destruction of the environment”.

Notwithstanding the appeal Bhutan’s GNH makes as an all-inclusive, happiness-oriented paradigm, there is something amiss. While Bhutan’s GNH has captivated the interest and admiration of a large audience overseas, the country is accused of the human rights violations of a large number of its population during the late 1980s. Moreover, behind the rhetoric of happiness, Bhutan has systematically marginalized various minority sections of the society in the form of constitutional norms and laws.

As suggested by the title, this dissertation deals with the examination of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness vis-à-vis the rights of minorities. It tries to explore the pillars and domains of the GNH and tries to explore the gaps in the policies in relation to the minority situation in Bhutan. This thesis consists of a total of six chapters.
The first chapter is the Introduction which gives a brief insight to the rest of the dissertation. It briefly discusses the Gross National Happiness paradigm of Bhutan and the issue of minorities. The chapter also provides a layout to be followed in the subsequent chapters. This chapter also contains an elaborate literature survey, builds a framework of analysis, explains the research gap, introduces the objectives and research questions and elucidates the methodology.

The second chapter is a general chapter entitled ‘Conceptualizing Happiness in Framework of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness’. This chapter deals with the theory of happiness and examines how Bhutan conceptualizes the concept of happiness in its Gross National Happiness (or GNH) paradigm. To begin with, the chapter discusses various conceptions of happiness as well as the two major schools of happiness, namely, hedonism and eudaimonia. It also explores the Buddhist philosophy of happiness. Ever since Guru Padmasambhava brought Buddhism into the country in the eight century, Buddhism has had a strong presence in the Bhutanese society. Mahayana Buddhism remains a state religion of the country today and has been intricately linked with culture and politics in Bhutan. In this manner, the Buddhist philosophy has inspired Bhutan’s GNH. The Buddhist philosophy of happiness not only flows from the teachings of Buddha, but it is also consistent with the ideals of eudaimonia. GNH is people-oriented and holistic as it takes the subject to development beyond materialism and prioritizes ‘happiness’ of the people. The focus then shifts to the debate between GNH and GNP, where various shortcomings of GNP Index are discussed. Gross National Product has been subject to having several flaws when it comes to measuring development. As an indicator, it measures things which can be quantified by assigning them monetary value. Thus, they exclude qualitative distinctions. However, over the last decades it has appeared that the qualitative factors are crucial to the understanding the ecological, social and psychological dimensions of economic activity. GNP fails to capture the environmental and social externalities of economic growth. Moreover, according to GNP indicator, even if most people in a country are worse off from one year to the next, GNP may reflect an increase if a few people are doing well. As such, GNP fails to capture the distribution of wealth and income. Furthermore, GNP does not reflect what money is spent on in society. The indicator grows as long as more money is spent, no matter what the money is used for in
The chapter also explains the four pillars and the nine domains of GNH. The Commission uses the Thimpu-based Centre for Bhutan Studies’ GNH Index, which measures four pillars of GNH: (a) Equitable Economic Development, (b) Environmental Preservation, (c) Cultural Resilience, and (d) Good Governance. These four pillars have been further classified into nine domains, which are: (i) Psychological Wellbeing, (ii) Time Use, (iii) Community Vitality, (iv) Cultural Diversity and Resilience, (v) Health, (vi) Education, (vii) Ecological Diversity and Resilience, (viii) Living Standard, and (ix) Good Governance. Additionally, the procedure of measurement of happiness is also discussed. The GNH Index uses two types of thresholds, namely, sufficiency threshold and happiness threshold. Sufficiency threshold indicates how much a person needs in order to enjoy sufficiency in each of the 33 indicators. Happiness threshold, on the other hand, answers the question “how many domains or in what percentage of the indicators must a person achieve sufficiency in order to be understood as happy?”

The third chapter is titled ‘Bhutan and its Minorities’. This chapter begins with defining minorities and identifies the various ethnic groups of Bhutan as well as the ethnic minorities of the country. The chapter also traces the evolution of the state of Bhutan in detail as it is important in understanding the evolution of the current ethnic majority-minority dichotomy and power-relations. The ethnic base of Bhutan can be segregated into four main categories: (a) the Ngalongs, (b) the Sharchops, (c) the Lhotshampas, and (d) various other tribal groups of relatively smaller numbers, like Bodos, Birmis, Khens, Lepchas and Mons. The ethnic minorities of Bhutan include the Sharchops, the Lhotshampas and the various indigenous people. The Ngalongs on the other hand are the dominant majority, both numerically and influence-wise. The chapter also draws attention to the plight of minorities of Bhutan and forms the background of critique of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness policy. The case of the Lhotshampas is discussed in detail. The chapter draws attention to the contention between the Lhotshampas and the Bhutanese government and examines how various factors like their numerical strength, non-conformist nature of their culture, occasional expression for political reforms, events in the neighbourhood like the merger of Sikkim with India, the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling fueled the Drukpas concern over the presence of the Lhotshampas in Bhutan. These fears eventually led to the persecution and exile of more than 100,000 Lhotshampas
from Bhutan to Nepal since the late 1980s, where they lived in refugee camps for more than two decades. By bringing for the issue of the Nepali-Bhutanese, the chapter forms a resounding basis of criticism of the happiness policy of Bhutan.

The fourth chapter is titled ‘Citizenship and Rights of Minorities: Acts and Laws of Bhutan’. In this chapter, various laws and acts imposed by the government of Bhutan regarding citizenship are discussed, along with those relating to marriage and customs which had both direct and indirect impact on the citizenship status of Bhutanese people. The most important act is the Bhutan Citizen Act of 1985 which has become a game changer regarding the situation of Bhutan vis-à-vis the minority Lhotshampas. Many stringent clauses were introduced in this act as well as the 1980 Marriage Act of Bhutan which made impossible for many southern Nepali-Bhutanese to obtain citizenship, therefore rendering them stateless. The chapter also deals with the constitutional provisions of Bhutan regarding citizenship and minorities and tries to uncover the inherent deficit in those provisions. By addressing to these constitutional provisions and state policies, the chapter tries to explore the socio-economic consequences they had on the citizens of Bhutan, especially to its minorities. As such, the chapter attempts to make detailed analysis of these acts and laws exploring the shortcomings within the constitution of Bhutan with regard to citizenship and minority rights. The chapter highlights the major loopholes in the policies of Bhutan which has shown a marked weakness in its commitment to the principles of fairness and justice, even though it has expressed support for such ideals in its constitution. The political developments that took place in Bhutan and the various acts and laws regarding citizenship imposed by the Bhutanese government directly coincide with the systematic exclusion of minorities of the country, mainly the Lhotshampas. The 1958 Nationality Law of Bhutan was a measure of integration of the Lhotshampas into the Drukpa nationality by the third King, Jigme Dorji Wangchuk. It provided the Lhotshampas citizenship, allowing them to emerge into the Bhutanese polity. However, due to skepticism on the assimilation process from the elites of the country, this law was superseded by the Bhutan Citizen Act of 1977 and later revised again in 1985. These acts imposed more stringent clauses regarding citizenship and a large chunk of the Lhotshampa population forfeited their Bhutanese citizenship and eventually left the country, mostly forcibly, as refugees.
The acts and law which followed the 1977 Bhutan Citizen Act, including the Marriage Act of 1980, as such were mechanisms to deny the rights to citizenship to a large number of the southern Bhutanese of ethnic Nepali descent. Similarly, the constitution of Bhutan does not favour the rights of minorities either. There are various provisions in the Bhutanese constitution which reflects a very inclusive character and marginalizes those ethnic groups who belong to different ethnicities than the *Drukpas*, and follow a different religion than Buddhism.

The fifth chapter is titled ‘Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness and Minority Rights’. This chapter deals with the examination of the concept of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness vis-à-vis its minority policy. It extensively deals with the marginalization of minorities in Bhutan which forms the background of critique of the GNH policy. The chapter examines three of the four pillars of Bhutan’s GNH, namely, the preservation of culture, good governance and sustainable socio-economic development and tries to understand the impact of the happiness policy on the minorities. By examining the pillars of GNH, the chapter concludes that Bhutan’s happiness policy possesses large number of loopholes regarding equal treatment of people living in Bhutan in various aspects. However, the fundamental problem is born in the constitution of Bhutan itself. As long as the provisions which are biased towards one ethnic community at the expense of the others are not amended, the systematic exclusion and discrimination of minorities will likely continue to occur. Moreover, the commitment to the preservation of culture and identity has resulted in a huge cost for the country's ethnic minority. The forceful imposition of *Driglam Namzha*, the introduction of *Dzongkha* as the national language and the requirement of all Bhutanese citizens to have knowledge of Dzongkha language, and to be able to speak and write *Dzongkha*, and the obligation to uphold the Buddhist heritage of the country all translates to the Bhutanization drive of the elites of Bhutan that leaves very little space for the ethnic minorities to enjoy the right to enjoy their own culture, language and religion. With regard to the issue of political freedom and political participation, there are again a network of government-imposed policies which do not give the people of Bhutan, especially the minorities any leverage or opportunity to advance their political desire. Besides, the constitution binds the people into keeping themselves from criticizing the king. Unpopular opinion and dissent voices, as such, have no space in Bhutanese
society and politics. While Bhutan has embarked on establishing democratic values in the country, the absence of transparency and accountability of the government shades doubt on the authenticity of the democratic stance of the country. Information is limited and hard to access and holding narratives on issues of Bhutanese refugees is prohibited. On these grounds, the chapter highlights the gap in the scholarship on Bhutan and happiness and brings to the fore, issues that so far has been confined to specialized human rights literature, some isolated reports in the international press, and Nepali mass-media, which is the issue of minorities and the Bhutanese refugees.

The sixth and the final chapter is the conclusion where I have enlisted the findings and sought to answer the research questions. Bhutan has been a forerunner of new development paradigm of Gross National Happiness and has gained popularity in the international scene. There are various commendable factors and elements in the happiness-oriented development paradigm of GNH. This dissertation, however, has sought to look into another pressing issue which the rhetoric on GNH has driven to the sidelines, which is, the issue of minorities. Since happiness is the overarching theme of the GNH framework of Bhutan, the government’s policies and practices are aimed to serve the purpose of keeping the citizens of Bhutan happy. Until the issue of minorities is not brought into Bhutan’s GNH policy debate, there is no way of knowing if the happiness policy is likely to succeed or not. Bhutan projecting itself as a Buddhist state suggests the desire to oppress the identity and culture of minorities. The manner in which Bhutan moved forward with assimilation and homogenization process, also referred to as Bhutanization, as a part of the development process, is evidentiary of the dominant elites’ desire to maintain their stance no matter what the costs are. The Bhutanese obsession with GNH, and in particular the imperative of cultural protection, provided a convenient ideological justification for the deportation of Nepali-speaking people. The expulsion of ethnic Nepalis from Bhutan and denial of rights makes it apparent that the “national” in Gross National Happiness only applies to certain sections of the Bhutanese population. This study was therefore a possible approach towards fixing the gap between the happiness study and minority issue. By bringing forth the minority debate into the examination the pillars of happiness, the study has raised a significant question of the accountability of the Gross National Happiness policy of Bhutan. This study has evolved through several chapters. Conceptualizing
happiness in the framework of Bhutan’s GNH has formed the theoretical basis for the study, followed by the identification of various ethnic groups and minorities of Bhutan, which was then followed by the examination of the crisis of ethnic minorities where the case of Lhotshampas is explored in detail. The study then shifts the focus to the inherent problems in the citizenship laws of Bhutan as well as the Constitutional provisions which reflect ethnic biasness. Lastly, the study has examined the pillars of happiness and brought forth the gaps in the happiness policy and the issue of minorities in Bhutan.